

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 002405

SIPDIS

DEPT PASS TO USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV EAID EFIS ECON PGOV EC

SUBJECT: CAMPAIGN AGAINST SHARK FIN TRADE TARGETS PUBLIC

REF: 04 QUITO 2923

¶11. Summary: On October 17 Environmental NGOs initiated a new campaign to conserve the dwindling shark population in Ecuadorian waters. Sharks are highly sought after for the price their fins bring on international markets. Lax enforcement has hampered efforts to reduce shark fishing, despite an October 2004 Presidential decree banning the sale or export of shark fins. The campaign, which includes television spots with Ecuadorian soccer players, is an effort to pressure the GOE into action. End Summary.

CALLING ON THE PEOPLE

¶12. Backed by the star power of Ecuador's top soccer players, environmental groups renewed their efforts to conserve Ecuadorian shark populations by initiating a new campaign on October 17. The objective of the campaign, lead by the NGO WildAid, is to associate Ecuadorian's emotions and pride in their soccer idols with the plight of sharks. The idea is to build widespread public pressure to force the GOE into protecting the shark populations.

¶13. The central message in the campaign's six different 20-second television advertisements is "as soccer united us, unite today on behalf of sharks." The television campaign, which shows graphic images of shark fin extraction, will be followed up with a series of exhibitions and concerts in a number of Ecuadorian cities. Campaign organizers will circulate petitions during these public events that encourage the GOE to design a national plan to oversee the fishing sector and monitor shark populations.

STRONG INCENTIVES TO FISH SHARKS

¶14. Campaign organizers face an uphill battle to stop the shark fin trade. The incentive to fish sharks originates in China, where shark fins are considered a delicacy. Demand is high for shark fin soup which, with its alleged aphrodisiac qualities, is considered a necessity at any wedding. It is estimated that the market for shark fins more than tripled from 1980 to 2000, reaching almost 12,000 tons. The market in Hong Kong continues to grow 5% per year.

¶15. The demand for shark fins sends Chinese buyers to Ecuador, among other countries, ultimately resulting in declines in shark populations. Press releases associated with the campaign note that in the North Atlantic, for example, populations for different shark species have dropped 60-90% over the last 20 years. From 1997 to 2003, official Ecuadorian shark fin exports to China and Hong Kong were 850 tons, which represents 1.7 million sharks. Given the large illegal export of shark fins in Ecuador, real figures are much higher.

¶16. Galapagos fishermen have long relied on sea cucumbers for a majority of their income. However, Ecuadorian sea cucumber populations are declining -- they are commercially extinct on the coast and nearly so in the Galapagos, where the overall catch fell by 75% from 2002 to 2004. As a result, fishermen in Ecuador are turning more and more to the shark fin trade for high-value catch. Chinese businessmen encourage the practice, providing loans to fishermen to invest in better equipment that will increase their catch. Members of the Galapagos fishing communities have acknowledged to Econoff the important role that visiting Chinese businessmen play in financing and encouraging the shark fin trade.

GOE INACTION

¶17. The October 2004 Presidential decree banning the export and internal sale of shark fins was an important step in developing a regulatory regime to stop the shark fin trade (reftel). However, the GOE has expended little effort in enforcing the ban. Even when arrests are made, judicial follow-up is almost non-existent.

¶18. For example, in June 2005 a fishing boat was discovered during a shark fin operation that already collected fins

from 30,000 sharks. While government officials have pointed to this case to demonstrate active enforcement of the ban, the facts do not support them. To begin with, the boat was only boarded because government officials thought that it was involved in narco-trafficking. Moreover, no action was taken against involved parties until a month later, when public pressure and attention from the press led to the arrests of the boat captain and a customs official who were involved in the scheme. Activists remain concerned that the case may die in the judicial system.

¶9. As a result of weak enforcement, fishermen show little concern for being caught engaged in illegal fishing. In September 2005, for example, two tour guide associations went public with evidence indicating that crew members of a tourist boat were illegally fishing for sharks in the Galapagos. Many in the Galapagos acknowledge that this practice is not uncommon. An accusation has been brought to the prosecutor by the Galapagos National Park (GNP), but little follow-up has occurred. If anyone is found guilty, it likely will be the ship staff. Tour operators, responsible for the boat's operations, are unlikely to be affected.

COMMENT

-----

¶10. Despite the involvement of high-profile soccer players, nothing concrete is likely to come of this campaign against the shark fin trade in the short-term. Economic incentives in the shark fin trade are too strong. Nonetheless, by targeting the general public, the campaign will help develop a long-term appreciation and concern for conservation.

JEWELL